Virilio’s Screen: The Work of Metaphor in the Age of Technological Convergence

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Abstract
This brief essay traces the evolving role of the screen in the writing of high-speed theorist Paul Virilio. In Virilio’s writing, the screen serves as the locus of lost dimensions of space and technological transformations of time; it modifies our relation to space, is a surface-mount for its ‘accelerated virtualization’. If Virilio does not theorize the technological differences between film, television and the computer, I argue, it is because, for him, the screen remains in a metaphoric register, a virtual surface which overrides any specificities of its media formation.

Keywords
architectonics • convergence • screen • Virilio

In some way, you can read the importance given today to glass and transparency as a metaphor of the disappearance of matter. It anticipated the media buildings in some Asian cities with facades entirely made of screens. In a certain sense, the screen became the last wall. No wall out of stone, but of screens showing images. The actual boundary is the screen. (Paul Virilio, 1993 interview: ‘Architecture in the Age of its Virtual Disappearance’)

Virilio’s screen: is it a cinema, television, or computer screen? Does Virilio parse the media specificity of these screens, or does he subtly elide their difference? More importantly, in an era of technological convergence, does it matter? As buildings are adorned with screens as exterior walls, as sports stadiums add Jumbotrons to the proscenium space of spectacle, as screens show games to sport-spectators in a time-loop of instant replay and a cross-cut to its fans, as fighter pilots and military strategists conduct maneuvers on
screens with global positioning, as televisions have gaming consoles and eye-toys, as computers interface with other screens and digital archives, as PDAs browse the web, as cell-phones take and transmit photos, have the ‘screens’ of these media lost their apparatical distinctions?1

In the following short essay, I wish to disentangle Virilio’s screens and suggest that if Virilio does not theorize the technological differences between film, television and the computer, it is because, for him, the screen remains in a metaphoric register, a virtual surface which overrides any specificities of its media formation. Known for his theorization of the logic of speed, the technologies of war, and for the ‘opto-electronic’ mutation in the ‘logistics’ of human perception produced by both, Virilio posits a new metaphysics: the screen is the locus of lost dimensions of space and technological transformations of time. It modifies our relation to space, is a surface-mount for its ‘accelerated virtualization’ (1998/2000: 16).2

But first: in order to place Paul Virilio’s writing in its intellectual trajectory – as part of a cumulatively built missile of 20th-century cultural critique – I suggest we return to an earlier writer who also attempted to incisively pinpoint the spatial and temporal consequences of modern technology. Equally French, uncannily prescient, reducible to the same initials (the paraph PV), the writings of Paul Valéry form an augury of a V-2, Paul Virilio.

In a 1928 essay, ‘The Conquest of Ubiquity’, Valéry (1964[1928]) imagines a
future moment when, in push-button ubiquity, ‘works of art’ will ‘appear and disappear at the simple movement of the hand’:

*Works of art* will acquire a kind of *ubiquity* ... They will not merely exist in themselves but will exist wherever someone with a certain apparatus happens to be ... Just as water, gas, electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, *so we shall be supplied with visual and auditory images, which will appear and disappear at the simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign* ... I don’t know if a philosopher has ever dreamed of a company engaged in the home delivery of Sensory Reality. (p. 226, emphasis added)

Walter Benjamin (1969[1936]) uses a lengthy quote from this essay as an epigrammatic launch to his own essay on the changing epistemology of ‘works of art’. ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ opens with Valéry’s proclamation: ‘For the last twenty years, *neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was* from time immemorial’ (p. 217, emphasis added). In Valéry’s loose historiography, the first two decades of the twentieth century foretold ‘profound changes’.3 While Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay has acquired its own ubiquity, one that has exceeded Paul Valéry’s work, Virilio channels both authors, taking their forecasts of the ‘profound change’ affecting works of art to a more quotidian exponent. Virilio (1984/1991b: 72) cites Valéry’s passage in which ‘visual and auditory images ... appear and disappear’ as an ‘augury of telecommunications’.4 For Virilio, new vectors of space–time–speed are produced as a result of transport and transmission technologies: ubiquity meets instantaneity. Both Benjamin and Valéry emphasize the apparatus of delivery more than the site of display; Virilio’s discourse of dematerialization and disappearance foretells a new logic to the visible, framed and virtual, on a screen.

Virilio began to diagnosis the architectonic consequences of the immaterial ‘interface’ of television screens, computer terminals and video monitors in the early 1980s. His writing is full of neologisms (‘tele-topographical’, ‘opto-electronic’, ‘the optic foyer’, ‘the cathode window’), paradoxes (‘without necessarily leaving, everything ‘arrives’,5 ‘one day the day will come when the day won’t come’6), and some of the irritating unevenness manifest in polemics by Baudrillard or McLuhan. Phrases appear and disappear in a fugal weave of intermittent and episodic argumentation; words are placed in italicized and bolded fonts for emphasis. In a tone of *fin-de-siècle* hyperbole fraught with loss and disappearance, Virilio (2001a) casts the screen as the site of ‘the passage from something material to something that is not’ (p. 116).

Virilio (1980/1991a) initiates his account of these changes in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, a svelte volume published in 1980 (translated 1991), which targets the cinema’s innate capacity to defer time, to dissolve material space. ‘The deferred time of the cinematographic motor’, he writes, ‘empties the present world of appearances, the ubiquity allows millions of spectators
that haunt the auditoriums ... to forget their material plight’ (p. 55). Laced with references to filmmakers Méliès, Cohl, Gance, Clair, as well as Welles and Disney, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* marks the cinema as an instrument of a new logic of visibility. The cinema, Virilio points out, relies on a ‘picnoleptic’ ellipse, the gap of what is invisible between frames, between shots, a disappearance that produces a new register of appearance. Writing of Méliès’ stop-action trick:

> What science attempts to illuminate, ‘the non-seen of the lost moments’ becomes with Méliès the very basis of the production of appearance, of his invention, what he shows of reality is what reacts continually to the absence of the reality which has passed. (p. 17, original emphasis)

As an architect struck by the manner in which the cinema substitutes material space for a new immateriality, Virilio remarks: ‘now in the time of cinematographic factitiousness; literally as well as figuratively, from now on architecture is only a movie’ (p. 65, original emphasis). The movie house was a transitional space for this transubstantiation:

> .... the evolution of moviehouses may be revealed as useful for analysis of the cities ... from now on architecture is only a movie ... the city is no longer a theatre (agora, forum) but the cinema of city lights. (pp. 64–5)

While Virilio asserts the specificity of cinema’s perceptual process in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, he also initiates a gradual ellision of difference between the screens of cinema, television and computers. Situating the computer screen as a descendant of cinema, he writes: ‘We’re still here in the domain of cinematic illusion, of the mirage of information precipitated on the computer screen’ (p. 46).


> ... everything is always already there, offered to view in the immediacy of an instantaneous transmission. In 1980, for example, when Ted Turner decided to launch Cable News Network as a round-the-clock live news station, he transformed his subscribers’ living space into a kind of
The 24-hour presence of CNN induced an insight about the screen as the site of architectonic disappearance:

The contour of daily living and the framing of viewpoint in an architectonic constructed of doors and doorways, windows and mirrors are replaced by a cathode framework, an indirect opening in which the electronic false-day functions like a camera lens, reversing the order of appearances to the benefit of an imperceptible transparence, and submitting the supremacy of certain constructive elements to that cathode window that rejects both the portal and the light of day. (p. 87, emphasis added)

The architectural metaphor ‘the cathode window’ began to appear in many of Virilio’s interviews in the period soon after the CNN launch. In an interview with Cahiers du Cinema in 1981, Virilio (1981/1988) describes the cathode tube of the video screen serving as an architectonic element: ‘It’s the new window’ he proclaims, a ‘cathode window’ (p. 191). In this frequently cited interview, it is the newly marketed video-cassette recorder which ‘creates a day’, an additional ‘false-day’ that seems to have changed Virilio’s thinking about the television screen.

The Lost Dimension (L’Espace critique, 1984, translated 1991b) was the book-length culmination of Virilio’s speculations about the changing dynamics of televusual space. In The Lost Dimension, Virilio describes the dimensional transfer performed as ‘three dimensions of constructed space are translated into the two dimensions of a screen, or better of an interface’ (p. 73). In evaluating the consequences of this transfer, Virilio conducts a subtractive arithmetic of space: as the materiality of three-dimensional space is ‘translated’ into the two-dimensional space of the screen, the ‘lost dimension’ brings us, he proclaims, to the ‘zero degree of architecture’ (p. 100). Virilio charts the transformation of the constructed environment due to an ‘integral cinematism’ (p. 86) and as ‘diverse projection apparatuses – magic lanterns, the phenakistoscope, the kinetoscope and all the cinemascopes’ led to the ‘architectural mutation of a wall-screen’ (p. 88, emphasis added). The transfer from the materiality of architectural space to the immateriality of the screenic image pivots on a ‘sudden confusion between the reception of images from a film projector and the perception of architectonic forms’ (p. 69). Architecture was dissolving, mutating into the hyphenate ‘wall-screen’.

In the opening section of The Lost Dimension, ‘The Overexposed City’, Virilio sets up his polemic about the ‘disappearance’ and ‘loss’ of architectonic dimension. The screen is an ‘interface’ which relies on a visibility ‘devoid of spatial dimension’, a ‘visibility without any face-to-face encounter in which the vis-à-vis of the ancient streets disappears and is erased’ (p. 13). The polis, agora and forum have been replaced by the screen. As punctuation,
Virilio writes: ‘With the interfacing of computer terminals and video monitors, distinctions of here and there no longer mean anything’ (p. 13, original emphasis).

In *The Lost Dimension*, the screen is variably described in relation to its media formation – cinema, television, computer. The cinema screen and the television screen differ only in scale:

> The situation of the ‘tele-spectator’ or the ‘tele-laborer’ at home is the same as that of the audience in the darkened theaters of Pagnol, yet with one major difference of scale, one which affects, more than the dimensions of the projection room, the space-time of the metropolitan concentration ... (p. 75)

As a television screen, the ‘cathode-ray screen’ (p. 19) becomes the ‘third window’ (p. 79). (The first window is the door, the second is the window itself, the third is the screen.) Virilio asserts ‘In the new trellis of lines, 625 or 819 lines, of imperceptible subtlety, the pixel replaces the bolt and the rivet’ (p. 93). And yet the screen is also a computer screen: ‘The office, which was once an other-place, an architectural aside, has now become a simple screen’ (p. 73).

In the section of *The Lost Dimension* entitled ‘Improbable Architecture’, Virilio conducts an elliptical excursus through Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay, expanding upon Benjamin’s most vivid and explosive image of ‘the film’. ‘Then came the film’, Benjamin famously wrote, and ‘with the dynamite of its tenths-of-a-second’ it burst apart the spatial materials of modernity – its taverns and city streets, offices and furnished rooms, railway stations and factories. Virilio extrapolates on the further consequences of the ‘constitutive dispersal’ in the far-flung spatial and temporal exponents of contemporary tele-communications. ‘Benjamin relied on the metaphor of explosion’, Virilio notes; in his writing, explosion is replaced by a slow dissolve. Architecture dematerializes, dimensions are lost. In the ‘aesthetics of disappearance’, ‘telematics replaces the doorway’ (p. 13) and the ‘pixel replaces the bolt’ (p. 93).

Another book published in 1984 demonstrates that Virilio’s account of the television screen was developing alongside his insights about the (fatal) interpenetration of military and cinematic technologies. In *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1984/1989), Virilio elaborated on the disappearance of direct vision in battle, of sight machines, surveillance, and camouflage. [In a 1997 interview, Virilio (2001: 24) notes that the publication of *War and Cinema* in 1984 was the same year as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and the coinage of the term cyberspace. In this account, the screen recedes as the camera, a sight machine of eyeless vision (‘the soldier’s obscene gaze ... his art of hiding from sight in order to see’ (p. 49)) serves as the instrumental co-terminus of perception and destruction, of ‘looks can kill’.

*War and Cinema* predicted, in an advance guard of seven years, the military
logistics of the yet-to-be-waged first Gulf War, its ‘derealization’ of military engagement and the use of images as ammunition. *The Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light* (2001b) (*L’Ecran du desert: chroniques de guerre*, 1991), written during and after the war of images in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, took the logistics of military perception to its logical extreme – the screen of their display: ‘War henceforth takes place in a stadium, the squared horizon of the screen, presented to spectators in the bleachers’ (1991/2001b: 41). The stadium – not the screen – is the metaphor here; the screen has become the real theater of military operation. When asked in an interview in 2000 why he used the title *Desert Screen* for his collection of writing about the Gulf War, Virilio returns to the ‘mirage’ of cinema, in an echo of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*: ‘The screen is the site of projection of the light of images – MIRAGES of the geographic desert like those of the CINEMA’ (1991/2001a: 135, original emphasis). As he writes in *The Desert Screen*, the screen has a mutational power:

It is almost as if the image in the mirror were suddenly modifying our face: the electronic representation on the screen, the radar console, modifies the aerodynamic silhouette of the weapon, the virtual image dominating in fact ‘the thing’ of which it was, until now, only the ‘image’. (p. 57)

Virilio began to note how the square of the screen (*au carré*) replaced the horizon of real space, a geometric measure used as the vanishing point of Quattrocento perspective. The horizon of the screen (*L’Horizon au carré*)\(^{13}\) forms, in Virilio’s coinage, ‘a real time perspective’:

> Just as the perspective of the event in real time in the *square* of the screen is no longer the perspective of the real space of the *line* of the horizon, so also the moment of *live* reception, ‘the real moment’, is no longer the present moment, that of everyday experience, but a moment falsified by immediacy itself. (p. 57, original emphasis)


> Architecture will ‘take place’ in the literal sense of the word, in both domains: in *real space (the materiality of architecture)* and *virtual space (the transmission of electromagnetic signs)*. The real space of the house will have to take into account the *real time* of transmission. (pp. 182–3, emphasis added)

In *Open Sky* (1995/1997), Virilio doubles back over his earlier writing as the ‘acceleration of communications tools’ and ‘teleaction technologies coming on top of the technology of mere conventional television’ (p. 9) further the split between ‘virtual and actual realities’ and the ‘apparent horizon and
transapparent horizon of a screen’ (p. 37). Virilio now describes how the ‘transapparent horizon of a screen’ takes over from the apparent horizon of Quattrocento perspective: ‘a “transappearance” that eliminates the normal boundary of the horizon line, exclusively promoting the screen frame’ (p. 41).

By the time he writes *The Information Bomb* (1998/2000), Virilio asserts a teleology from Hollywood movie-making to a catastrophe of a metaphysical scale: ‘what began with the grand-scale Hollywood of the 1920s was ... the catastrophe of the derealization of the world’ (p. 25). Walter Benjamin’s explosive metaphor for the cinema as an epistemological TNT becomes, in Virilio’s precision-guided critique, an ‘information bomb’. The ‘presentation of reality that is both accelerated and augmented’ on screens which display the ‘instantaneous superimposition of actual and virtual images’ (p. 119).

The aim is to make the computer screen the ultimate window, but a window which would not so much allow you to receive data as to view the horizon of globalization, the space of its accelerated virtualization. (p. 16, emphasis added)

As Virilio’s screens have multiplied in global extension, distinctions between them disappear, are lost.

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Figure 2  The horizon of the screen. Photo: Anne Friedberg, 2004.
Notes

1. See my discussion (Friedberg, 2003) of the material differences between, and convergences among, 'display technologies' and 'delivery platforms' in 'Delivery and Display: Inter/facing the Screen' (original title), published as 'CD and DVD' in The New Media Book (BFI, 2003).

2. See the Virilio references at the end of this essay for an explanation on the formatting of Virilio references in the text. For these references, page numbers, where given, refer to the English editions.

3. Valéry (1928/1964: 225) writes:
   
   But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful …
   
   We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art. (emphasis added)

   Benjamin (1969[1936]) also forecast an impending 'profound change', as he marks the initial effects of the 'convergent endeavors' of lithography and photography. Benjamin asserts an earlier date as a turning point marker: 'Around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public' (p. 219, emphasis added).

4. Virilio misattributes Valéry's 1928 'augury of telecommunications' to 1936, the year of Walter Benjamin's essay, collapsing the two works as coincident not sequential.


6. Used as opening epigram to Open Sky (1997).

7. Virilio uses an epigram from Marcel L'Herbier as a chapter banner in The Lost Dimension: 'Film is a new age for humanity' (p. 41).

8. In The Lost Dimension, Virilio (1991b) notes the 'continuous televsional day' available to CNN viewers:

   ...the experience of Atlanta, where since 1980, Ted Turner's Cable News Network has allowed Americans to receive at home and direct – 24 hours a day and seven days a week, every day and every week – images from around the world through broadcast satellite orbiting above the Equator. (pp. 86–7)

9. Unless one is familiar with the order and logic of 'The Work of Art' essay, Virilio's own picnoleptic intermittent references to it are left somewhat cryptically inscribed. Virilio also seems to be skimming the surface of Giedion 1991[1940]). Although Lost Dimension begins with a discussion of Walter Benjamin and the cinematic, Virilio makes no apparatical distinction between cinema and television – and refers to both as 'televised interface'.


11. This paragraph from 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is oddly translated in the Daniel Moshenberg translation from Virilio's French to English. Instead of the standard Harry Zohn translation of Benjamin's Kerkerwelt as 'prison-world', Moshenberg's translation reads: 'Then came the film, and with the dynamite of its tenths of a second, blew up the concentration-camp universe, so that now, abandoned in the midst of its far-flung debris, we take on adventurous expeditions' (Virilio, 1991b: 71).
12. ‘I got the foreboding of virtual space ... And the curious thing is that I published Lost Dimension in the same year as William Gibson published Neuromancer ... the reason why space is critical is because it is on the verge of becoming virtual space’ (Virilio, 2001: 24).

13. Au carré can mean both on the screen and squared. “L’Horizon au carré” is the title of a 1990 article (published in Libération, 29 September 1990) about the relation between the screen and the horizon for fighter pilots who maneuver missions on the basis of looking at a screen and not the horizon-line of the earth below. A section of Desert Screen entitled ‘The Squared Horizon’ (dated 2 September 1990) opens with a list of the dramatis personae in the impending television war:

How can we fail to recognize, after a month of standoff, that the true intervention force in the Gulf is television? And more precisely CNN, the Atlanta network. Saddam Hussein, and George Bush, certainly but also Ted Turner, the owner of Cable News Network. (Virilio, 2001b: 20)

References
Paul Virilio references
Selected works by Paul Virilio are listed below in order of the date of French publication; the date of English translation follows in bold. The following bibliographic format emphasizes the chronology/trajectory of Virilio’s thought rather than emphasizing the reception of his work in English, as do bibliographies ordered according to the dates of translation.


[The most comprehensive bibliography of Virilio’s work in French and English to date has been compiled by Armitage, 2001. Armitage’s bibliography includes books, articles, collaborations, working papers, interviews and translations.]

**Other references**

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